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ABSTRACT

The author discusses findings of a content analysis of readers and texts on social problems and identifies questions raised by the task force which performed the analysis. The purpose of the study was to ascertain the nature of social problems courses and to determine if such courses are appropriate as undergraduate "first courses" instead of traditional introductory sociology courses. Four social problems most frequently cited in texts are poverty, social stratification, crime, and violence. Twenty-three fairly common additional topics are identified. Most texts represent social problems current to the time of publication. An examination of texts in terms of client-centeredness, scope, and specialization reveals that they are strongest in the area of client-centeredness, meaning they prepare students for post-college employment, develop skilled human resources, and stress action orientation toward solving theoretical problems. Social problems course outlines are found to reflect the same learning outcomes as traditional introductory courses. One problem is that students with high school sociology backgrounds usually have been taught social problems with an action orientation, and introductory college courses have difficulty teaching them the methodology of scientific investigation. The author sees a need to develop students' skills of analysis, interpretation, and systemic investigation. Mere presentation of social problems is not an adequate teaching strategy. (Author/AV)

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TEACHING SOCIAL PROBLEMS: A Review and Discussion of Possible Approaches

This paper developed from an analysis of social problems texts prepared in conjunction with the A.S.A. Undergraduate Sociology Project: Task-Force A, The First Course.[1] We were interested in the possibility of adopting Social Problems as the First Course in the discipline in place of the traditional Introductory Sociology course. To determine this possibility we investigated the topics and issues discussed in social problems, readers and texts, as well as the ways in which the material was presented. I would like to touch briefly upon some of the findings from this content analysis and then introduce the questions which were raised among the members of the task force who have taught social problems to see if our experiences were isolated cases or more broadly shared concerns. I invite your reflections about social problems as a course in general and, more specifically, as the first course in the discipline.

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First of all, we had to determine what was the content of social problems courses to determine areas of congruence and divergence in the field. We found some consensus among authors concerning the relevancy of specific social problems. Those most frequently cited were poverty and social stratification (one chapter in each of 25 texts) and crime and violence (one chapter in each of 24 books).

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[1] "Social Problems: The First Course". Scherer, Jacqueline. Position Paper, Sub Task Force A - Undergraduate Sociology Project to be released in Fall, 1976.

The next series of problems for which we found a minimum of one chapter were: race (18 books), marriage and family problems (16), drugs and alcoholism (14), mental disorders and suicide (13), unemployment and work issues (13), sexual deviance and victimless crimes (12), ecology (12), sex roles and sexism (11) and corporate and governmental power (11). Other topics with a minimum of one chapter included: juvenile problems (9), discrimination and prejudice (8), mass communications (7), war (6), the criminal justice system (6), health care (5), alienation (4), religion (4), old age (3), world power (3), life styles (3), dissent (2), rural problems (1), and famine (1). The criteria of one chapter is a very crude measurement since it is quite possible to discuss the problem of discrimination in a chapter on race or touch upon health care in an overall discussion of poverty. This list however, does suggest those areas in which there is minimal agreement about what is a social problem, as well as those topics currently not recognized as serious social issues. For example, the absence of leisure as a social problem in the 70's as contrasted to its significance in the 60's and the end of concern about automation, which was a key social problem in the 50's. Once can only assume that the social problems texts represent current social concerns and that a social problem is one that society defines as such at a given moment in time.

We then examined three dimensions of the texts: client-centeredness, scope, and specialization, which attempted to get at three educational goals usually found in discussions of the objectives of the first course. The learning

goals are basically those centered around requirements for understanding sociology as a scientific discipline, and include an introduction into methods and techniques of research; the classical theories that have dominated inquiry, and the terminology essential for handling basic sociological concepts; secondly, sociology as an important ingredient in general education requirements and an essential part of the liberal arts objectives embodied in the C. Wright Mills view of the sociological imagination; and thirdly, learning sociology as part of the personal development of the individual, particularly as this leads to self-insight and practical skills required in living. Our classification categories were client-centeredness for the developmental educational goals, scope for those tied to general education, and specialization for the disciplinary orientation. Bell's lucid discussion of general education provided the foundations for the last two, although we modified his ideas in several ways.[2]

We found that social problems texts were strongest in the area which we termed "client-centeredness", a term used by Liebert and Bayer to refer to, "three social usefulness items concerned with preparing students for post-college employment, with providing skilled human resources to the local community, and with developing responsible citizens"[3] (1975) (40.1%). We modified these to include such items as practical solutions to social problems and action orientation toward solving theoretical problems. We contrasted

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[2] Bell, Daniel The Reforming of General Education, Columbia University, 1966.

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[3] Liebert, Ronald and Bayer, Alan; Goals in Teaching Undergraduates: Professional Reproduction and Client-Centeredness. The American Sociologist, Vol. 10, #4, November 1975.

the amount of client-centeredness with the emphasis upon scope and found that social problems texts were about equally divided in these two areas. (Scope 36.4%, specialization, 23.5%). The degree of scope was determined by how broadly the author made use of historical material, references to the humanities, international analyses, non-sociological research, and discussions of values.[4]

The content analysis confirmed the fact that social problems texts were satisfactory teaching tools for meeting all three educational objectives usually associated with the first course. We also examined course outlines used in social problems courses, and these reflected the three educational outcomes, although there was considerable differences among courses as to which learning outcome was held most important. It is the issue of priorities which poses difficulties, and I would like to mention two issues that are salient in discussing priorities: first, the debate about priorities within the discipline itself and secondly, the range of approaches to social problems as evidenced in both texts and course outlines.

The problem of priority is thorny indeed. In my own experience, which I have found common, social problems arouse student interest and enthusiasm, but pose serious problems for the sociologist introducing a scientific discipline. The definition of a social problem and its importance are not empirical matters, but represent political, economic and historical factors. In contrast, a sociological problem is basically one that meets the test which Berger developed: What is going on here between people? How can we explain inter-

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[4] A more detailed description of the analysis will be in an unpublished paper, "The Goals of the First Course in Sociology: Can Social Problems Accomplish these Ends?" by Scherer, Jacqueline and Herriman, Joyce which has been submitted for publication at the present time.

action?[5] Empirical questions are characterized by "is", not "oughts" or "shoulds". There is serious student confusion in social problems about the sociologist as social problem solver and the sociologist as scientist. This issue becomes more common throughout the educational system, as larger numbers of high school students arrive in college with high school sociology as a background. Since high school sociology stresses social problems more often than not, the college instructor who teaches intro sociology and methodology encounters a complex task trying to change the student's orientation from action to scientific investigation. In the classroom the instructor soon finds himself or herself spending considerable effort convincing students that sociology is the study of society, as well as a useful tool in the development and explanation for social problems. Furthermore, superficial discussion of social problems, popular in American society could obscure rather than illuminate the basis of these issues, particularly the structural basis of social control.

Approaches to social problems reflect also, the diversity within sociology about the study of the discipline itself, for example, sociology as a science, a reflexive discipline or as an action oriented study. There is a division between those who approach the discussion of social problems through an analysis of social structure (Eitzen: Social Structure and Social Problems or Sociology of Social Problems by Norton and those who adopt more conflict orientations: Value and Interests in Conflicts, Antonio or Troubled Land, Stewart.) The most extreme is Gliner who views American Society as the social problem. The distinction between social problems texts and readers also becomes blurred in

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[5]Berger, Peter Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective. Doubleday, 1973.

the approaches to the topic, since almost all texts recommend outside reading that represents particular views of the issue, or summarizes different positions; and almost all the readers have considerable editorial introductions to put the varied selections in some kind of coherent reading. There is general agreement that social problems are not empirical analyses as much as political interpretations of issues, and that the difference between journalism and a serious study of social problems is the interpretive framework which the study of society provides, but the depth and differences in interpretation are extensive.

This diversity makes it almost impossible to form any generalizations about learning outcomes between different social problems courses. In effect, although it is possible for a student to take social problems as a first course and be as well prepared in terms of disciplinary specialization as one from a traditional introductory course, it is not at all certain. In fact, it is not at all certain that students in two social problems courses study the same problems, or analyze social problems in any coherent sociological framework. This variety although useful in terms of meeting individual student interests and making this an adaptable curricula for certain institutions (such as community colleges) or particular students within the first course (the difference between an engineering major taking sociology as a distribution requirement and a nurse taking it as part of professional program), also means that standards of evaluation and equivalency are difficult to develop. With variety comes a loss of control, and probably the only fair assessment of social problems courses must be made in light of a broader educational experience -- either interest in the discipline as measured by further study in the field, or by

student evaluations of new interest in social concerns. There have been almost no studies which begin to do this.

These conclusions lead to consideration of a whole host of other issues: if social problems are not empirically delineated and often reflect non-sociological interest, why should sociologists continue to monopolize these courses both in terms of actual teaching and in writing texts and other materials? Stated simply, are social problems our business? There are, of course, serious pragmatic reasons for us to continue to do so -- such as to maintain jobs, to insure research entry into relevant areas, and to constantly test our theoretical developments in the hard empirical reality of daily life, but we can only justify our interest in teaching these courses as the first consideration to the degree that we make sense of these problems through interpretation within the framework of our discipline. We must learn how to actually do what C. Wright Mills suggested was our prime business-relating private troubles to public issues.[6]

Having said this and, more seriously, actually believing it to be true, I must end with the realization that it is high time that we be held accountable for teaching social problems. I do not refer here to the tremendous disillusionment with sociologists as social engineers or our inability to translate many of our most fundamental theoretical understandings into practical policies. I refer instead, to the quality and caliber of the social problems courses which we teach. We share with all social studies programs the hard reality of failure in making significant gains in citizen

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[6]Mills, Wright The Sociological Imagination: Oxford University Press, 1959.

competence in many spheres because we lack hard, down-to-earth research and analyses of what we are doing and what we want to do and how we can judge whether we do it or not. For example when we examined the stated goals of authors in the texts, we found universal agreement that they wanted to "present, introduce" and even "alert" students to social problems. I suggest that as professional sociologists our emphasis must be much more on the skills of analyses, interpretation, explanation and systemic investigation than upon presentation. In this sense, the key issue in teaching social problems becomes the sociological analyses of issues, rather than the journalistic or entertainment element of introduction. If this is our focus, social problems can be a stimulating first course in the discipline, a high-powered advanced course, important in general education, and in the sense that sociology is a mode of inquiry relevant to our understanding of the human condition, an essential part of the undergraduate curriculum.